DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 252 307 PS 014 831

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TITLE Transitions: The Influence of Parent's Attitudes and Behaviors on the Adjustment of Two Year Olds to a New School Experience.
PUB DATE Mar 84
NOTE 32p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (Los Angeles, CA, November 8-11, 1984).
PUE TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Attachment Behavior; Family Influence; Interviews; Measures (Individuals); *Mothers; *Parent Attitudes; Parent Child Relationship; Parent Teacher Cooperation; Preschool Education; Rating Scales; *Separation Anxiety; *Student Adjustment; *Toddlers
IDENTIFIERS *Parent Behavior

ABSTRACT

The families of 10 children enrolled in a class for 2-year-olds at the Mills College Children's School participated in a study of parent attitudes about separation and parental behaviors that minimized separation anxiety and facilitated a smooth transition from home to school environments. The sample included nine mothers who were married and living with their husbands, and one single parent. Two instruments were employed to gather data: The Parent Questionnaire Interview form and the Child Classroom Adjustment Rating Form. Results suggested that separation anxiety is a complex phenomeon experienced by both parent and child. Overall, it was concluded that achieving a smooth transition depends on (1) the quality, consistency, and patterns of interaction between parent and child; and (2) the elements of program design, staff composition, and general feelings of acceptance conveyed to the child in the new setting. No easy formula exists for sorting out the many influential factors involved in this set of experiences. Any assertion that transition to nursery school encompasses a homogeneous set of experiences would be untenable. (RH)

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# TRANSITIONS:

# THE INFLUENCE OF PARENT'S ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIORS ON THE ADJUSTMENT OF TWO YEAR OLDS TO A NEW SCHOOL EXPERIENCE

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March 1984

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## INTRODUCTION

Beginning school is an important milestone for the young toddler. But adjusting to a new school environment can also be a stressful experience for some children and their parents. This transition from home to school marks a "rite of passage" that confronts young children with an important developmental crises. They must develop a sense of trust in their new surroundings and in the teachers who will substitute for their parents. Trust is an intangible feeling, though, and not something that can be dispensed in premeasured quantities or taught by simple techniques. It can only be nurtured in young children by the sensitiveness with which adults respond to overall needs. If children have established a well-developed sense of trust in their parents, they will be more open and responsive to their new caregivers, and see the environment as safe and secure. This in turn will allow them to more easily assimilate experiences, expand cognitive awareness, and achieve a sense of autonomy and independence (Erikson, 1950).

Just how the toddler responds to the developmental hurdle of separation is determined by many factors, including general disposition and personality structure. But there are two kinds of influences that seem to have a particularly strong impact. First, there is the setting itself, the space and architecture, play resources, planned experiences, and the actions of the teachers. These contextual factors set the stage for the transition and provide the overall climate for adjustment. Second, there are the parent attitudes and behaviors. Mothers in particular are at the center of the socialization process, and seem to be dominant shapers of the child's transition to the new environment. Their behaviors, whether overt

or covert, deliberate or incidental, are critical in determining the child's responses to the new school. The present study focused predominantly on this second category of influences seeking to identify specific parent attitudes and behaviors that facilitated a smooth and good adjustment.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

### Theories of Attachment

Any discussion of maternal influences on the young child must rely heavily on the research of John Bowlby (1969, 1973). His contributions over the last twenty years have been extremely influential in the field of child development. Bowlby believes that it is essential for mental health that the infant and young child experience a warm, intimate, and continuous relationship with a single, primary, mothering figure. He particularly stresses the need for continuity. Bowlby believes that early bonding with the mother is an essential precursor to secure social relationships. Like Erikson (1950), Bowlby strongly believes that the nature of this mother-infant bond is important to later development. How this bond really affects social and cognitive competencies of later life has yet to be demonstrated, however.

Bowlby (1969) points to the universal occurrences of attachment behavior in both man and subhuman primates. He provides abundant evidence that infants develop an attachment to a specific person some time about six to twelve months of age. It is interesting to note that Bowlby's research has sometimes been used to support the argument that twenty-four hour care, day in and day out, by the same person is necessary for the healthy adjustment of a young child. This is not the case. Bowlby, while

emphasizing the importance of the mother-child bond and regarding an attachment to one mother figure as crucial, has always been explicit that it is also important to accustom infants and toddlers to other caregivers. He stresses, however, that care must be taken to ensure that alternative arrangements for the children of working mothers must be consistent and regular.

Rutter (1981), while supporting the Bowlby's general thesis that attachment is a fundamental characteristic of the mother-child relationship, points out that there is also great individual variation in the strength and distribution of attachments. The main bond is not always with the mother. Moreover, bonds are often multiple. The research of Schaffer and Emerson (1964) substantiates this thesis. They found that the sole principal attachment was to the mother in only half of the 18-month-old children they studied. In nearly one-third of the cases the main attachment was to the father. Although there was usually one particularly strong attachment, the majority of the children showed multiple attachments of varying intensity.

Considerable research has also been conducted to determine the factors that are most likely to foster the development of attachments. Ainsworth (1978) believes that a bond is most likely to develop to people who actively interact with the baby and who are responsive to the baby's cues. Ainsworth calls this sensitive responsiveness. She suggests that infants are born with a biological propensity to behave in ways which promote proximity and contact with their mother figure. According to this view, attachment develops as a consequence of parental responsiveness to these innate behaviors during the infants critical first years of life.

Ainsworth (1978) also makes the important distinction between mother-child attachment and the child's attachment behavior. Attachment refers to the affectional bond or tie that an infant forms between self and the mother figure. This bond tends to be enduring and independent of specific situations. Attachment behavior, on the other hand, refers to the class of behaviors that share the usual and predictable outcome of maintaining a desired degree of proximity to the mother figure. In early childhood, attachment is shown primarily by the child's seeking to be near the other person; showing distress on separation from that person; showing joy or relief on reunion; and being oriented toward that person even when not in close proximity.

Another important distinction in the attachment literature is made between secure and insecure bonding. While secure relationships may reflect somewhat the inborn characteristics of the child, maternal sensitivity and responsiveness appear to be the central elements in the formation of secure attachments. Parents that are tuned in and responsive to the child's signals develop the most secure relationships. Ainsworth and her colleagues found (1978) that one of the characteristics of this bonding is that it enables children to feel secure in strange situations. They found that children of sensitive and responsive mothers showed less crying on separation. When reunited with the mother, these children quickly go to her, seek contact and consolation, then are able to resume play.

Paradoxically, the children with the most insecure attachments seem most closely bound to their parents. They have difficulty moving away from the mother to explore novel environments, undertaking new learning experiences, and interacting with unfamiliar people. These children may cling and make excessive demands for attention. Because these may be the

very behaviors that caused the parents to act unaffectionately in the first place, a repeating behavior and response pattern is reinforced (Maccoby, 1980).

Ainsworth and her colleagues (1978) also identified insecure children that acted differently from the excessive clingers. These children exhibited avoidance behaviors. They seemed relatively unaffected by the mothers' whereabouts even when their mothers left the room. Upon return they generally ignored her. Ainsworth found this type of child rare but especially interesting, because their behavior seemed to imply an absence of an emotional bond with the mother.

Maccoby (1980) believes that children who are securely attached by the time they enter their second year of life are better equipped to cope with the range of challenging experiences they encounter during their preschool years. She cites the work of Main (1973) which demonstrated that attachment at twelve and eighteen months does have an effect on the way the child handles developmental tasks during the next year. These young children play with toys more expressively, are involved longer, and pay more attention to specific features of the toys.

Waters, Wippman and Sroufe (1979) also conducted a series of research experiments to test a similar hypothesis. They sought to assess the positive affective correlates of secure attachment in infancy with competence in peer group interactions in the preschool years. They found a strong correlation between securely attached children and eager, self-motivated and outgoing behaviors. One must interpret the findings from such studies cautiously, however. It would be erroneous to conclude that such correlations prove there is a causal link in the behaviors. It is

difficult to know if early secure attachments enable the child to be outgoing and task oriented, or whether children who form secure attachments easily are also children who tend to be more self-directed anyway.

Separation Anxiety

Separation anxiety generally makes its appearance in American infants at about 10 months of age. According to Kagan (1978), the mother's absence implies a discrepancy from the child's schema in which the mother is included as an essential part of every situation. The mother's absence also means a disruption of habitual responses to her and the inability to make contact with her. These may be important sources of separation anxiety even if mother leaves only temporarily. Separation anxiety according to Kagan decreases when the mother's absence is no longer a discrepant event or when the child can do something about the mother's absence. Both these changes occur with age. As children grow, they experience more frequent separations allowing them to better interpret the mother's absence and be confident of her return.

Rutter (1981) points out that following the mother and seeking close proximity are characteristic attachment behaviors that tend to increase at times of stress. Thus, even though the child grows older and can handle more temporary separations from mother, stressful situations like going to a new school will elicit strong separation anxiety and result in stronger attachment behavior.

Most of the research conducted in the area of separation has focused on maternal deprivation or the consequences of long-term separation when the child has been institutionalized for some reason. While this kind of separation is obviously quite different than what the child might

experience going to a new nursery school, it has generally been found that separation anxiety is more intense when it simultaneously occurs with a strange environment (Douglas & Blomfield, 1958). It has been hypothesized that in such situations the anxiety may be due more to the unfamiliar environment than the separation as such. Rheingold (1969), for example, found little distress when infants were placed in strange environments with their mothers, but considerable distress when placed there on their own or with a stranger.

Similar results are reported by Ainsworth (1978). Ainsworth and her colleagues used a procedure called the Strange Situation to study the ways in which the mother's presence or absence affects the child's behavior and emotional security. She found that an unfamiliar or strange situation might be expected to activate three behavioral systems in varying degrees of strength: exploratory behavior, wary/fearful behavior, and attachment behavior. Exploratory behavior is antithetical to attachment behavior in that it leads the child toward interesting features of the environment and thus usually away from the attachment figure. If a child is alarmed, attachment behavior or wary/fearful behavior tends to be activated. Most of these studies have focused on the reponses of infants, however, and few studies have studied this thesis in a systematic fashion with toddler and preschool-aged children. It seems safe to conclude, though, that strange persons and strange environments are fear-provoking stimuli for young children, and that the presence of the mother goes a long way to reducing or eliminating the distress in a novel setting.

The Robertsons' (1967) research sheds some light onto the conditions that can help relieve stress for the child during separation. Their work with children in their residential nursery led them to conclude that it is

not the separation as such that is the key factor, but rather the accompanying distortion of the mother-child relationship. The Robertsons took special care to talk to the children about their mothers during separation. Their goal was to help the children maintain a vivid memory of their mothers. They also attempted to maintain as similar a daily routine in child rearing and patterns of discipline to which the children were accustomed. In addition, they structured the environment to allow new attachments to develop gradually and comfortably.

Bowlby (1973) sees the goal during the toddler/preschool period of development as one of helping the child move to an understanding and reciprocal partnership with the mother. Children at this age begin to conceive of the mother as a separate person with needs of her own and thus will begin to modify and adapt themselves to accommodate their mother's needs. Verbal communication clearly facilitates this mutual adaption. The waning of separation fears allows children to increase the distance they can comfortably put between their mothers and themselves. They may continue to cling or follow their mothers, though, when they are tired, ill, or emotionally upset.

Maccoby (1980) states that this kind of mutual accommodation is best seen in the child's ability to delay direct physical contact with the parent and form temporary substitute attachments. A shared set of ideas, goals and plans now permits the child to be confident that even when mother is out of sight, she is acting in ways that are integrated with the child's own plans of action. By the age of two and a half, children can derive security from the presence of a person they have know only briefly. It appears that children this age need not be attached to this new person in the same way that they are attached to family members in order to make use of that person for providing security. This is clearly not the case with

younger children. They were inconsolable and unable to transfer their trust to the new acquaintance.

We see then that adjustment to new situations rests in large part on familarity and control. Children's feelings of helplessness decrease as they learn ways to make adults and the environment responsive. As this happens, the environment seems less uncertain and fear provoking. Cognitive growth enables the child to classify situations so that their relationship to previously encountered events can be seen. This generally mitigates strangeness and gives the child less reason to seek the security of contact with a single attachment figure. The acquisition of language also helps children signal needs. With increasing language facility, children are less dependent on familiar caretakers to act as their exclusive agents for understanding and meeting their needs.

## PURPOSE

The present study looked at parent attitudes about separation and sought to identify specific parental behaviors that minimized separation anxiety and facilitated a smooth transition from home to the new classroom environment. The study specifically focused on three areas: (1) Parent attitudes and expectations about the separation experience; (2) The parent-child relationship; and (3) The child's adjustment in the new classroom.

### Parent Attitudes and Expectations about the Separation Experience

In assessing parent attitudes that might be relevant to the transition experience, it was particularly important to assess the mother's feelings about what she anticipated would happen during those important first days of school and the extent to which she viewed the transition of her child

from home to school as cooperative venture with the teacher. Additionally, if the parent was a working mother, it was important to assess how she felt about leaving her child with a substitute caregiver and if there were some underlying residual feelings of guilt associated with this decision.

In her insightful book, World's Apart, Lightfoot (1978) points out our society makes no provision for emancipating mothers. Mothers have made enormous investments in their children. With few other involvements outside the home, they cling to the one role that has so far validated their lives. The consequences and repercussions of the maternal feelings of loss when children move on to school may well come out in a subtle competition with teachers. Many mothers have an underlying fear that teachers will do a better job than they have done with their children. They may also be somewhat ambivalent about relinquishing control. Moreover, mothers' feelings of self-esteem are often ties to their child's smooth transition from home to school and overall achievement in school. The child's "rite of passage" from home to school thus becomes an equally important milestone for the mother.

For the working mother, a different host of concerns often surface. Even though it has been found (Hoffman, 1971) that maternal employment does not necessarily have a negative effect on the child, many working mothers still have strong ambivalent feelings about leaving their young toddlers with a substitute caregiver. These attitudes may well have a strong impact on how well the child adjusts in the new environment. Moreover, sometimes the transition phase is also accompanied by a transition for the mother to a new job or new work hours. The accompanying anxieties, tensions, and apprehensions about her own adjustment may influence how well she is able to respond to her child.

The Parent-Child Relationship

This aspect of the study focused on the general pattern of interaction that was observed between the mother and child. Was the mother warm, nurturing, supportive and encouraging; or was she rushed, directive, controlling, uninterested, and unresponsive to the child's needs. In addition, the study sought to identify specific strategies that parents use to help their child prepare for a new school experience.

The Child's Adjustment in the Classroom

Maccoby (1980) points out that the counterweight to attachment is curiosity. Children are positively attracted by novel elements in their environment as long as security-giving elements are also present. As they grow older and spend more time at a distance from their mothers, they begin to substitute other, more distant forms of involvement for the immediate physical contact with the mother that they seemed to require when they were younger. Examining the child's behaviors in the classroom provides a good index, therefore, of overall adjustment in the transition process.

There were several questions that were addressed here. First, how easily did the child separate from the parent? Were there any behavioral cues would indicate distress? For example, were there physical expressions of anxiety such as clinging to the mother or gripping her hand or leg? Were there verbal expressions of crying, whining, or distressful statements such as "Mommy, Don't go!" Were there nonverbal cues that would indicate feelings of distress such as tears in the child's eyes, withdrawal from contact, or general sulking behavior? Did the child seem to separate too easily possibly indicating an insecure attachment to the mother?

Second, how did the child adjust to the new experiences available in the classroom? Was there curiosity and inquisitiveness associated with exploratory behavior? How many and what kinds of activities did the child engage in? What characterized the quality of interaction with the and other children? And what was the general mood of the child: eager, relaxed, and happy or tense, sullen, and unhappy?

Finally, how did the child adjust to the new caregivers? Did the child seek approval and accept assistance when offered? Did the child develop an affectionate, caring relationship with the teachers and student teachers and refer to them by first name?

## METHODOLOGY

### Subjects

Ten families whose children were enrolled in the two-year-old classroom at the Mills College Children's School were selected as the sample. The study focused specifically on the attitudes and behaviors of the mothers in these families and on the separation and adjustment behavior of their children. The sample included nine mothers who were married and living with their husbands and one single parent. The ethnic composition included three Black families, one Iranian family, and six Caucasian familes. Three of the mothers held Ph.D degrees, four had M.A. degrees, and the remaining three women were were currently attending college.

The mean age of the ten children on their first day of school was 27 months. The composition of the group of children included five boys and five girls. None had any obvious physical or mental disabilities that could be identified at school entry. Four of the children had previous

group experience at an infant-toddler program on campus. Three of the children had older siblings. None had younger siblings.

Setting

The setting for this study was a laboratory school on the campus of Mills College in Oakland, California. Because the school is able to utilize graduate students in the classroom as student teachers, the staffing pattern is somewhat different than what might be found in other preschools in the community. The class is supervised by a head teacher who holds a Masters degree in education. The remaining staff are graduate students who teach in the classroom two or three days a week. There were ten children in the two-year-old class and four. The program is based on an interactionist philosophy with a strong Piagetian influence. The spatial organization of the environment is informal with a variety of challenging activities available each day for the children. The pace is very relaxed and a high emphasis placed on self-directed activities by the child with the teacher acting as a facilitator and support as needed. The program places a strong emphasis on the development of language and communication skills as well as the development of a healthy self-concept and self-esteem. Parents are encouraged to spend the first week in the classroom and gradually decrease the number of hours as their child indicates familiarity and comfort in the new surroundings.

Instrumentation

Two instruments were used in this study. First, the Parent Questionnaire-Interview Form (Appendix A) was developed to elicit responses relating mother's attitudes, expectations, and perceptions about her relationship with her child during the transition period. Lemon's research

(1973) provided a useful guide in structuring the questions on the questionnaire. Second, a Child Classroom Adjustment Rating Form (Appendix B) was designed to focus on the child's adjustment in the classroom environment and on the observable parent-child relationship. This instrument was adapted from the rating forms used in the Levenstein Mother-Child Home Interaction Project.

Procedure

Mothers were all send a letter inviting their participation in the transitions study. Every mother responded enthusiastically at the opportunity to share her thoughts about the separation experience. The interviews were conducted in an office at the Children's School during the month of January approximately four months after the children had started school. Each parent was sent a copy of the questions a few days before their scheduled interview. The interviews lasted approximately 70 minutes each. The interview format followed a semistructured approach using the printed questions as a guideline but allowing room for the mothers to relate personal anecdote and side-track to other concerns and questions as it seemed appropriate. Each interview was taped recorded and a transcript of the tapes were made following the sessions to code responses.

The Child Adjustment Rating Form was distributed to the head teacher and three student teachers in the two-year-old classroom. The teachers met to come to some agreement as to what kinds of behaviors would fit into each category. The children and their parents were observed daily for the first two weeks of school and then weekly for the next three months. The results of their observations were combined into one composite adjustment rating for each child with respect to classroom behavior, relationship with the teachers, and the mother-child interaction.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Perhaps the most dominant theme that surfaced in this study was the uniqueness of each transition experience as it was expressed by the parent and observed in the child. Every mother characterized the transition period as being very significant. Eight of the mothers indicated that the transition went smoother for their child than it did for them (item #7 on parent interview). The detail with which they could recall those first few weeks of school was startling. The vivid descriptions and their emotionally charged accounts conveyed the seriousness of the event for them. These mothers could reconstruct with surprising preciseness the events that transpired during the month of school.

Interestingly, the teachers tended to rate the child's adjustment as slightly more difficult than the parents of the child did. Seventy percent of the responses in this category did not parallel and, in all cases, the teachers rated the child's adjustment as more difficult than the parent did. A reverse trend happened, however, in the ratings of the parent's adjustment. The teacher's rating did not match the parent's rating of her own adjustment in 80% of the cases. In each case the teacher rated the parent has having less difficulty than the parent felt she did. This may have been due to a couple of factors. The teachers focused their attention on outward behaviors of the mother and the child-parent relationship. The teachers were obviously not aware of the anxiety that the parent was feeling inside. Parents were uniformly more tense and unsure of themselves than the teachers perceived them to be.

No single strategy could be identified as being the most helpful in preparing the child for the first day of school. Several mothers role played what school might be like. Others read some children's books on

beginning school, and still others came by the school to peek at the playground and look inside the classroom windows. One parent had an outing with the whole family to buy the child a lunch box and new shoes for the event. The important thing to note here was that all the parents did something, and for the most part began this preparation three or four weeks before the first day of school. It would be difficult to objectively assess the degree to which these actions had a positive effect on the child, however, without some kind of control group.

All the mothers felt the home visit by the head teacher prior to the first day of school was particularly helpful for reducing the level of anxiety in their children. The head teacher took a camera along with her on these home visits to take a photograph of the child that would be made into a name tage for the first day of school. She also brought some playdough for each child as a gift. Several mothers commented how the children valued this gesture. In fact, one mentioned that her child still had that chunk of moldy, smelly, playdough (now four months old) because he refused to part with the teacher's present.

In each case where there was an older sibling, the parents felt that it was a positive influence in the adjustment of the younger child. This seemed particularly true when the older children had also attended the Children's School and could share experiences about the environment and help assure the younger children that they would enjoy school. It was anticipated, however, that those parents who had gone through the school transition with another child would find this second time around easier. This was not the case. Even though these mothers knew what to expect, without exception they felt that their second child was unique and so were the responses to the school experience. Thus, while the mothers may have been slightly more prepared in knowing what to anticipate, they did not

think the experience for the child was necessarily any easier or difficult because of it.

A few familiar and anticipated patterns emerged in many of the parent interviews. The predictable daily routine and sense of consistency with which the teachers responded to the children each morning was highly appreciated by the parents. All of the parents commented on the importance of have a teacher greet their children at the door and take a few minutes to talk about something the child was wearing or something the child brought to school. The consistent morning routines also gave the parents something concrete that they could do to help their children during the first few minutes of the day. They would assist their child in hanging up their coat in the cubbie area, getting their name tag from the name board, and feeding the classroom pets. Several mothers commented on the soft classical music that filters through the classroom during the morning arrival time as being particularly soothing to their children. Several of the parents commented also on how they valued the teacher's flexibility in accommodating late arrivals. Had classroom policies dictated prompt arrival this would have put considerably more pressure on them in trying to handle all their before-school responsibilities. Such a frenetic pace they felt surely would have had negative consequences on their child.

The children differed considerably in the way they manifested separation anxiety. All the children at some point in the first two weeks of school felt distressed at their mother's absence. For two children this was only a momentary lapse of sadness. For these children acknowledging their distress, holding them, and consoling them seemed to work well. For three other children who seemed to "fall apart" when their mother would leave, distraction seemed to be the most helpful technique in helping them through their separation anxiety. One child would be fine when his mother

would leave, but midway into the morning would dissolve into tears. Typically, after ten minutes of withdrawal, he would be fine.

No strong sex differences emerged in either the parents' attitudes and expectations about how their child would adjust or in the actual adjustment behaviors observed in the children. Rutter (1981) reports that several studies have shown that the effects of day care are more noticeable and more consistent in the case of boys compared with girls. This distinction was not found in this study.

Seven of the mothers stated that their children insisted on bringing some kind of transition object to school with them each day. These items varied, but usually it was a small blanket or a favorite stuffed animal. Having this kind of favorite support item seemed unimportant for the remaining three children. Nor was there any direct relationship between the child's adjustment and active engagement in classroom activities and whether or not that child needed a support item. Interestingly, however, the seven children that had a favorite attachment object were also the ones that most looked forward to bringing something special to school that might be added to the class nature collection or a food item that could be shared for snack. These children treasured the opportunity to pack up these items and trek them to school. The other three children would occasionally bring something, a special book, record, or toy but it was usually at the urging of the parent.

The head teacher suggested that all the children bring a photograph of their mother and father to school. These photographs were used to make a child-parent matching game. They also served as a visual reminder to the child about the special qualities of mommy and daddy in their absence. The children seemed to enjoy these activities, but it was the mothers that were

most touched by this approach. This one activity probably did more to dissolve any feelings of competition the mothers might have had about their child's new teacher than anything else.

One interesting pattern emerged with respect to the nonverbal signals the mothers tried to convey to their children. Eight of the ten women indicated how important they felt it was to be confident, self-assured, and in control of the situation so that those feelings could be conveyed to the child. They admitted there were times where they did not adhere to this philosophy, but nevertheless they felt it was quite important. Mothers were asked during the interview how they would handle the following hypothetical senario: After ten minutes in the classroom with the child upon arrival the mother assesses that her child is content and involved enough for her to leave. She states to the child that she is going to leave but as she starts for the door, the child protests. Does the parent carry through or find some excuse to linger? These eight mothers felt it was important to carry through on actions even though the child might cry or cling as she started to leave. This is where they put their trust in the teachers to handle the separation anxiety. The eight mothers said that they would often feel upset in these situations but nevertheless they felt they must convey to the child the trust they had in the teachers to handle the situation. The experience of having gone through this uncomfortable kind of separation once or twice gave them confidence that, in fact, their child would survive. This was validation that their behavior was appropriate. It was interesting to note that the behavior of these mothers was consistent with their philosophy. The remaining two mothers responsed in similar fashion, but their actions during separation were not consistent with their words. They would hesitate and then ask their child if he/she was ready to let mom leave. Interestingly, these were the children that had the most difficulty making an adjustment to their new classroom during

the first month of school. This might lead one to conclude that it is too much responsibility to ask a child to indicate when mother should or should not leave. One mother stated, "Children need to know that we have confidence that they will be able to cope when we leave. If we hesitate in following through on what we say we are going to do, we may be communicating to the child that we do not really believe they will be all right when being left."

No noticeable pattern surfaced in the adjustment of children of working mothers compared with those that did not. Again, each situation seemed so individual so generalizations are difficult to make. Working mothers as a whole did feel somewhat more rushed and hassled in the morning when they dropped of their children, but not necessarily any more anxious about the separation itself. Nor did their children appear to exhibit any noticeable differences in overall adjustment to the classroom. One working mother confessed that she wanted her child to be unhappy so that she (the mother) would have an excuse not to show up for work. Fortunately, her actions and behavior did not convey this to the child.

The mothers differed sharply on their feelings about the appropriate role they should play in the classroom during the adjustment period. While all of them felt that it was important and necessary to spend "some time" in the classroom upon arrival during the first two weeks of school, they had quite different opinions as to just what their role should be. Four of the mothers believed that parents should be only be observers. "Just become part of the woodwork," as one mom stated. These mothers felt strongly that they should not convey to their child that they were there to be a play companion. One mother, on the other hand, felt it was very important to engage in all the activities with her child and become an active part of the morning routine. She continued to stay and visit in the

classroom well after her child could handle the separation without any noticable distress. The other five mothers preferred to follow the lead of their children and would get minimally involved in classroom activities only if their children requested it.

All ten parents stated with varying degrees of emphasis that they felt the teachers strived for an unrealistic state of tranquility in the classroom. They believed that some disruptive behavior, be it crying at separation or a full-fledged temper tantrum, was not only okay, but perhaps even desirable to have on occasion. They felt it was important for the children to see that the classroom was a safe environment and that one could occasionally "loose control" and still be loved and cared for by the teachers. Their point is very valid and one that teachers might benefit from. What was unstated but perhaps implied by these remarks is that these mothers also need reassurance that it was all right for <u>their</u> child to occasionally loose control. High expectations put an enormous amount of pressure on the parent who sees her child as an extension of herself.

## CONCLUSION

The results of this study suggest that separation anxiety is indeed a complex phenomena experienced by both parent and child. Overall it may be concluded that the success of achieving a "smooth" transition depends on the quality, consistency, and interaction patterns established between parent and child and the elements of program design, staff composition, and general feelings of acceptance conveyed to the child in the new setting. No easy formula exists for sorting out the many influencing factors involved in this set of experiences and any assertion that transition to nursery school encompasses a homogeneous set of experiences would obviously be untenable.

This study sought to identify some of the themes and observable patterns that characterize the behavior of mothers and children during the transition period. But many important considerations remain to be explored. What are the effects of teacher-child ratio on adjustment patterns of children? How does the total size of the group influence transition? How might different staffing patterns or teacher characteristics alter behavior? This study assessed the attitudes and behaviors of a very small group of mothers. It would also be interesting to study a more diverse group of parents from other ethnic and cultural heritages as well as socio-economic backgrounds.

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APPENDIX A

# MILLS COLLEGE CHILDREN'S SCHOOL

TRANSITIONS STUDY - PARENT INTERVIEW

Background Information: Date _____

Mother's name _____ Age _____

Employed outside the home? yes _____ no _____

Occupation _____ Work hours _____

Place of employment _____

(distance from Children's School? _____ miles.)

Level of education completed: HS college 1 2 3 4 MA Ph.D _____ other

Father's name _____ Age _____

Occupation _____ Work hours _____

Place of employment _____

(distance from Children's School? _____ miles.)

Level of education completed: HS college 1 2 3 4 MA Ph.D _____ other

Ages of other siblings: _____ M/F _____ M/F _____ M/F

Parents living together _____ separated _____ divorced _____

1. Who has primary responsibility for bringing your child to school? _____

2. Child's previous experiences with other caregivers before attending Mills?

- limited to babysitters during days and evenings _____
- stayed overnight with babysitter in our home _____
- away from mother for more than one week _____
- in care of babysitter for more than 20 hrs per week in own home _____
- attended infant/toddler program or playgroup outside of home for more than 10 hrs per week without mother's presence _____
- other:

3. Did your child know any his/her classmates before the first day of school?

4. Why did you enroll your child at the Mills College Children's School. (rate in order 1 (most important) to 5 (least important).

____ convenience in hours with respect to my other commitments

____ convenience in location

____ academic reputation of the program

____ financial considerations (tuition,scholarships)

____ social experience my child would derive from the program

5. Describe your "typical" morning routine from the time your child gets up to the time you leave him/her at school.

6. During the first week of school how many hours did you spend in the classroom? _____ In the observation foyer? _____

7. How would you characterize the overall transition process during the first month?

1 without a hitch - smooth sailing all the way

7 difficult - extremely anxious and tense

For your child: _____
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

For you: _____
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

For your family: _____
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

8. What specific things did you say and do to prepare your child for the separation and transition to a new experience?

____ We did not talk about it because I thought it might make my child anxious and uneasy.

____ We read books dealing with separation and new experiences?

____ We talked about what he/she could expect.
For example, I said:

____ We visited the classroom on _____ occasions before the first day of school.

____ Other:

9. What role did your husband and/or your other children play during this transition period?

10. What behaviors best describe your child's reactions to this new environment? (Indicate most appropriate response a - f below. Qualify if necessary)

_____ on your first visit to the classroom?

_____ on the first day of school?

_____ at the end of the first week of school?

_____ after two weeks?

_____ after two months?

a. Exhibits anxiety about getting out of the car and entering school (Crys loudly, screams or has tantrum).

b. Fine until we arrive at the classroom, then whines and clings. (moderate, excessive).

c Cautiously enters the classroom and does not respond to teachers for the first five or ten minutes. Gradually takes part in favorite activity. For example:

d. Seems okay until I depart, then displays verbal or nonverbal separation anxiety. For example:

e. Eager to enter the classroom. Wants to hang up name tag and coat all by him/herself. Does not appear upset or disappointed when I leave.

f. Other:

11. What most nearly describes your reaction and response to each of the situations above:

_____ I felt tense, anxious, and embarrassed and wanted to be able to leave the scene as quickly as possible.

_____ While I felt uncomfortable, I knew that I could handle the situation and preferred to do so alone.

_____ I felt I wanted the teacher's active intervention in assisting my child through any separation anxeity that he/she might be experiencing.

_____ Other:

12. How would you characterize your child's response to the teachers in the classroom during the first week of school and after one month?

____ ____ Avoidance behavior to their overtures to involve him/her in conversation or activity.

____ ____ Would respond hesitantly and reluctantly to their efforts to involve him/her.

____ ____ Would seek contact, consolation, and assistance when distressed, hurt or experiencing some separation anxiety.

____ ____ Actively sought their attention, approval, affection and contact in a wide variety of situations throughout the morning.

____ ____ Responded to the teacher as a mother substitute in my absence and felt comfortable and relaxed being nurtured and cared for.

13. Were there any other events occurring in your personal or professional life that might have had an affect on your own feelings about leaving my child in a new school experience?

14. If you are a mother that works outside the home, what disruptions were caused in your work routine during the first month of school. Was your employer understanding and accomodating or did you experience any added stress because of these disruptions?

15. What did the Head Teacher do that was specifically helpful in making your child feel welcomed and comfortable in the classroom?

16. What did the teachers do that may you feel uncomfortable and uneasy about leaving your child in this environment?

17. Were there any special things that you observed other parents doing that you felt were particularly helpful in helping their child making a smooth adjustment?

18. Anything you observed other parents doing that seemed detrimental to the process?

19. What best describes your child's responses to your questions about his/her school experience when you are at home or away from the school?

_____ He/she is nonresponsive to my questions about school.

_____ Will respond to specific questions about another child or a particular incident that happened during the school day, but is generally unemotional in these responses.

_____ Refers to the teacher by name

_____ Talks spontaneously and enthusiastically about incidents in school.

_____ Other:

APPENDIX B

EVALUATION OF CHILD'S ADJUSTMENT TO SCHOOL EXPERIENCE

Summary of Teacher's Observations

Child's name _____ Date _____

First day of school _____ Age on first day _____

Instructions: Mark the number at the right that best describes this particular child for the time period indicated.

1. Almost not present
2. Slightly present
3. Ususally present
4. Often present
5. Markedly present

| A. Classroom Behavior | first day | at two weeks | at two months |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Generally cheerful and content | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 2. Is inquisitive and curious | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 3. Seeks out new activities | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 4. Is spontaneous and expressive | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 5. Exhibits self control and can tolerate some frustration | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 6. Refrains from aggressive behavior toward others | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 7. Is attentive and can concentrates on activities | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 8. Enjoys mastering new tasks | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| B. Relationship with Teachers | | | |
| 9. Expresses needs in language | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 10. Accepts help when offered | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 11. Is trusting of teachers | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 12. Responds to touch, holding, and nurturing from teachers | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 13. Greets teachers by name | _____ | _____ | _____ |

C. Mother-Child Interaction

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 14. Mother responds verbally to child's requests for attention. | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 15. Mother clearly verbalizes to child expectations for behavior | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 16. Mother discourages child's over-dependence | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 17. Mother verbalizes affection toward child | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 18. Mother actively encourages child's independence | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 19. Mother shows warmth and affection toward child | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 20. Mother uses positive reinforcement | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 21. Child exhibits physical anxiety when entering class | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 22. Child exhibits verbal anxiety when entering class | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 23. Child displays anger when mother departs | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 24. Child clings and is tearful when mother departs | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 25. Child displays nonverbal distress during the morning | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 26. Child asks or cries for mother during the morning | _____ | _____ | _____ |

How would you characterize the transition process during the first month?

1 without a hitch - smooth sailing all the way

2 difficult - extremely anxious and tense

For the child: _____
1 2 3 4 5 6 7

For the mother: _____
1 2 3 4 5 6 7